Eliza Timberlake Dean
Smithfield, Va

Copied + cataloged in a white notebook.

WALTER CECIL RAWLS LIBRARY & MUSEUM
P. O. BOX 318
COURTLAND, VIRGINIA 23837

From the Minute Book of the S[illegible]endent of Public Schools, Isle of Wight 1870-1912

History of Education in Isle of Wight County from Colonial Times

Prepared by Dr. Jno. R. Purdie

Smithfield, September 1st, 1880

To E. M. Morrison, Supt. Pub. Schools.

In response to your request for any matter relating to schools in Isle of Wight County from its settlement I offer the following facts based on record and tradition as evidence and my own personal knowledge which may aid in preparing your statistical report.

The first school in the county of which I have read or heard through other citizens was a Free School established in Smithfield soon after the town was incorporated by a benevolent lady of wealth — the following are the most important facts relating to its origin and decline.

Arthur Smith possessed a large body of land in the forks of Pagan Creek, a tributory of James River. The stream was navigable for vessels drawing 10 feet and wharves had been constructed at the present site of Smithfield many years before the town was by law established and a large export and import trade was then carried on by native and Scotch merchants.

In the year 1752 Arthur Smith petitioned the Genl. Assembly for an act to incorporate the town of Smithfield, which being passed he caused the land on which the store houses and some dwellings were located to be surveyed and laid off into lots and streets. The evidence is on record that one Joseph Bridger was indebted to Elizabeth Smith wife of

Arthur Smith for the sum of ₤ 125 in her own right -- that Elizabeth Smith prompted by benevolence & andesire for the diffusion of knowledge conveyed that debt to Joseph Bridges, Miles Casey & Rich. Kells in trust for the establishment of a Free School in the town of Smithfield by deed bearing date Jany. 6th 1753, with a special covenant that the principals of the School should be <u>always</u> Clergymen of the Church of England. A lot numbered 26 in the first plan of the town, on which was a brick building 30 feet x 18 was purchased by the trustees and fitted up for school purposes.

The School was then opened, with the Rev. Reid, minister of the Point of Newport as the principal and its exercises were continued until the political troubles which terminated in the severence of the colonies from the Mother Country & of the Established Church from any connection with the new States of Virginia, rendered the fulfillment of the Special Covenant in the deed impracticable, we may legitimately infer that the Principals of this School during its practical continuence were ministers of the point. viz.

What branches were taught, the number of pupils &c, &c can only be matters of conjecture.

Of the schools in the County during the War of 1776 if any I have no information of any kind. Soon after the treaty of peace was ratified, four gentlemen viz. Wm. Taylor, Thos. Prince, Lawrence Baker& my great Grand father Geo. Purdie established a school in Smithfield and employed a teacher named Gordon. Mr. Gordon was a Scotchman of a high order of classical and mathematical attainments but noted for absence of

mind that caused him to commit many ludicrous freaks, some of which have been handed down. Rules were enacted and rigidly enforced, viz. one rule the no. of pupils was restricted to 15. They also required daily (except Sunday) morning and evening response, with Saturday afternoon as a general holy day contingent on good behavior.

One of the terms in the contract was that the teacher should board with his four employers alternately for three months. The annual vacations were 2 days at Easter, Good Friday, one day at Whitsuntide, 2 weeks from 15th Aug. and one week at Christmas.

I received the above particulars from my father who was a pupil from the inauguration of the School until he left home for educational purposes. in Geneva Switzerland. One of the pupils was the late Judge B. Taylor of Norfolk.

This School was kept up during the life of Mr. Gordon. The date of his death in Smithfield may be learned in the office of the Clerk of the County Court between 1790 & 95 perhaps.

During the life of Mr. Gordon or after his death tradition says the Rev. Henry Burgess a quondam Colonial Parson, opened a school in Smithfield which was closed in a short time, consequent upon his acceptance of the position of Principal of the ~~Smithfield~~ Mill's field Acadamy a school of high order, near Berlin Southampton County. Several persons distinguished in after life were prepared for college at that Acadamy. among them the Ex President of U. S. Wm. H. Harrison.

We learn from tradition that the next school in Smithfield after the Rev. H. Burgess was under the management of a teacher named Bowden. This name represents an old and highly respectable family of Isle of Wight before the county of Southampton was formed from a part of its original territory. More than 100 years past, a Bowden, a near relation if not the old teacher himself, was clerk of the old Isle of Wight Chappel, a colonial home of Worship connected with the established Church, which position he held at his death & for year previous. Some of his direct descendants of the name are yet citizens of the two Counties. Within my recollection Jno. Bowden was Crier of the Courts of Isle of Wight, an office which he last held, it being abolished or becoming obsolete about the date of his death. The branches taught in this School, the No. of pupils &c I did not learn or have forgotten but I presume the curriculum embraced only the elementary branches, the number of pupils indefinite, the above was rec'd from the late Nathl. Young who was a pupil of this School.

The presumption is legitimate that what was called old field schools existed in many parts of the County before and continuously after Mr. Smith's Free School was established, of which however no account has reached me.

At what date the School of Mr. Bowden was closed I have nothing authentic. It may have been open until Hamilton Shields became the teacher of the town school about the year 1810. At least, not even tradition alludes to any between the two.

Between the years 1808 & 1812 H. Shields was the Principal of a school in Smithfield, in which were taught not only the Rudiments of education but the high branches Greek, Latin, and Mathematics. Some of the distinguished men in this & the adjacent Counties were prepared for college in this School. Mr. Shields was a man of culture and learning, well qualified to instruct. He commanded a Volunteer Company of Rifles & entering the service after war was declared in 1812 the school was necessarily closed.

Soon after the sessation of hostilities he established the Norfolk Beacon, which he edited until his death. From some of the pupils of this school I have heard tragic statements of his severe discipline, tyrannical government & cruel system of corporal punishment. One who had felt his rod with painful sensibility swore if his life was spared to be revenged if it required 50 years to accomplish it. Altho Shields was an official teacher of youth a scholar and a social companion yet he was more highly distinguished for his excessive punishment of the pupils for trivial faults or deficiencies. His being a school of the highest order between Norfolk and Petersburg his classes were large and filled from the Counties Southampton, Nansemond, Surry, and Isle of Wight.

Soon after the ratification of the treaty of Ghent a family consisting of a brother and three sisters immigrated to Virginia from Ireland. In 1816 Jas. Mitchell the male member of the family opened a school in the old part of the present residence of S. G. Boykin. His curriculum embraced the ancient languages, Mathematics &c &c. his oldest sister conducted the

elementary department. He was highly educated for a professional teacher and an accomplished musician. For some reason, however satisfactory to himself doubtless Mitchell unexpectedly abandoned his school late in 1816 and made his exit for parts unknown, leaving his three sisters here. They married each a citizen of the town, lived among us for years, two of them dying in this county and the other in Richmond City. Some of their descendants occupy at present very respectable social position, here, in Richmond and in Baltimore. At that time my school days had not commenced but I well remember that Mitchell's pupils were numerous, of ages from 10 to 20, in fact a large school for a small country town.

Jan. 1st 1817 was the date of my first matriculation in school being 6 years and 5 months old. True I had received a rigid home schooling from my father, whose instruction of an older sister and myself made us well acquainted with a small Latin Grammar and able to read Caesar. Pardon me for a little egotistical aside. When I entered school I could answer every question in Ruddeman's Rudiments of the Latin Grammar, acquired entirely from oral instruction having never seen the book until syntax was reached.

I will also declare in my whole school life, I never recited a lesson in English Grammar; the principles of grammar I possess if any were derived from the Latin, Greek and French & from association with those who spoke the English correctly. My first teacher was Martin Dunn a recent Irish immigrant. He was physically a Hercules, though perhaps not a Soloman in

wisdom nor an Arnold in literary culture. However he gathered in his school a number of pupils from 10 to 20 years of age and taught the small boys Reading Writing & Arithmetic, the larger Greek, Latin Math. Dunn was fond of his cups and sometimes excitable. His discipline was severe, the instrument for punishment being a stout leather one fixed on a wooden handle about a foot long the free end divided into 9 heavy throngs [sic] about a foot in length with knots in them. He kept the school only 9 mos., his departure hastened perhaps by a violent rupture with one of his patrons whose son a youth of 17 he had slapped in the face. An impression is clear on my mind that in 1816 the last year of Jas. Mitchell's school and 1817 when Mr. Dunn taught Jos. B. Whitehead kept a school in Smithfield for teaching the English branches. His school was large and I well remember the rivalry sometimes leading to quarrels and fights between his boys and those of Mitchell and Dunn.

Mrs. James Deford (nee Mitchell) also taught small children from the time her brother Jas. Mitchell left here, until her death.

We must give Dunn some credit for having engaged a substitute to fill his place in the 4th quarter of the scholastic year viz. Simon Patrick Walton another Irishman whose classical attainments moral deportment and social qualities justify the opinion that he was at least the equal of any teacher in Smithfield before or since his time. In the Autumn of 1817 after the arrival of S. P. Walton, some of the citizens of the town and county inaugurated a company for the establish-

ment of a high school in Smithfield which was organized by the election of Presd. Treas. Sec. Board of Trustees and the adoption of rules and regulations for the governance of the school. It was ordained that the rules should be read by the pupils alternately every Monday morning after school was called to order, that the maximum number should be 30, that the fees (from $30 to $40 per annum should be paid quarterly in advance. A morning and afternoon session on fine days in each week: the vacations to consist of Good Friday, Easter Monday and Tuesday, Whitsunday, two weeks from 15th Aug. and December &c &c. The teaching of Mr. Walton in the 4th Quarter of 1817 being satisfactory and his general conduct correct the school trustees unanimously elected him Principal of the High School on 1st Monday in Jan. 1818; the school was opened in the old part of the dwelling now owned and occupied by C. B. Hayden under the sole charge and management of S. P. Walton. In 1818 the patrons so highly approved of the manner in which Mr. Walton conducted it and the success of his system for imparting knowledge the School Company deemed it unnecessary to place him longer under the supervision of Trustees: the Board was dissolved and the institution delivered to his individual management as a private mixed school, Under such rules as he thought proper.

The reputation for the instruction of youth acquired by this school in its first year and the urgent applications by parents and guardians for the admission of their sons and wards, made it imperatively necessary to employ an assistant.

In the 8 years following the Principal was assisted by never more than one in any year the 1st asst. being Jas. M. Jordan for two years, then late Hon. Joel Holleman for like term, then John O'Brien & perhaps others whom I have forgotten. The duties of the assistant was confined to the female pupils & such boys as learned only the English branches. The females above alluded to were few in number never exceeding 3 or 4 in a session but conclusive of the trust and confidence reposed in the Principal by mothers as well as fathers. The high standing of this school for its thorough educational training, with the advantages of its location for health, economy in Board &c attracted scholars from many of the Southside counties from Petersburg to Norfolk, a large portion of whom therein rec'd their preparation for college. The reflection is sad but true that of the very many educated by Mr. Walton only myself and two others survive to tell of the pleasures enjoyed and pain experienced in and around this ancient institution of learning.

The discipline of the school was neither cruel or very severe but the Rod was not spared when its use was essential for order. Punishment was seldom administered for imperfect recitations. I never rec'd a whipping about a lesson but for boyish mischief and violation of the mild rules I have with many others felt the strokes of "My Rattan". While this school was in operation I can bring to mind only the school for small children of Mrs. Jane Deford. About the same time Gideon Powell conducted an average country school in Red Point some four miles from town. As there was no special

school house in the town unoccupied dwellings were rented as opportunities offered among them the present dwellings of Capt. Jas. F. Chalmers & Dr. Jno. R. Purdie for that purpose both of which have since then been enlarged and otherwise much improved. For the last four years of its operation the lower rooms of the Smithfield Union Lodge No. 18 A.F.& M. Masons were occupied by the school.

In 1825 to supply a great public deficiency books were opened for subscription to a fund for purchasing a town lot & erecting thereon an academy building. The enterprise succeeded & in accordance with an invitation the subscribers met & appointed a committee to purchase and superintend the erection of a building, of which comt Col. Willis H. Wordley was the chairman. In due time a Board of Trustees, who by petition to the Genl Assembly in the session of 1826 & 26 incorporated by an act "to incorporate the trustees of the Smithfield Academy". The Building Committee purchased a vacant lot No. __ opposite the present M.E. Church erected thereon a two story brick building & reported it would be fit for the purpose designed by the beginning of the session on 1st of Oct. 1826.

At a meeting of the Trustees held in the summer of 1826 S. P. Walton and Rev. Wm. G. H. Jones Rector of Newport Parish were nominated for the office of Principal of the Academy. Each of those gentlemen had warm friends in the Board who for week previous to the election had urgently presented the respective claims of the two aspirants for the position to the citizens.

The result of an animated and close contest was the election of Mr. Walton "man proposes but God disposes" and in this case it pleased Him to take from earthly labor this faithful servant who although a member of the Church of Rome we hope and trust has received the welcome of all sincere Christians. The death of Mr. Walton occurred in Sept. 1836, only a few weeks before the first session of the Smithfield Academy was to have been opened, in the new building. He was a "ripe"& good scholar" and an accomplished musician. Under his instruction the first Smithfield Band was prepared to perform in public. Several years before his death he had married Miss Sarah Hodsden whom he left a widow but without children.

On the 15th Aug. of that year my preparatory schooling terminated and my mind being diverted to studies in another direction, I cannot say positively who was elected to fill a vacancy but am inclined to think it was Mr. Walton's competitor Rev. W. G. H. Jones. That he kept a school for several years about that time in the Academy or elsewhere in the town I can safely assert. From 1st Oct. 1836 to 1861 when the late hostilities began the Academy comtinued in successful operation with occasional intermissions under several teachers elected annually. A few of the Principals in the order of their election I will dubiously mention Q. N. Stoddard, W. W. Day, Jno. S. Stubbs, Clayton G. Coleman, Jas. R. Garlick now a Rev. D. D. in the Baptist Church of Va., Geo. R. Atkinson, late County Judge, R. M. Casey, Saml Moore of Goochland and Murit of New Hampshire. Before Atkinson A. Bronson I

think Albert J. Clark, who was a defeated candidate. When Wm. W. Day was elected Principal of the Academy, opened a very good private school with a academic curriculum, which continued in successful operation for several years. With or soon after the opening of the Academy some marked changes were made in the rules of the schools in Smithfield before that time. Changes generally approved by Young America but perhaps held in doubtful propriety by Old Fogies i.e. the number of pupils had no fixed limit -- the daily sessions were reduced to one only but that of 6 to 8 hours duration and last but worst the annual vacation to 3 months. This is not an appropriate occasion for me to express myself on these points and therefore I restrain my feelings. Until and during the tutorship of R. M. Casey the rod was freely used in aid of discipline. So far this sketch refers to male or mixed schools. The first effort for the establishment of a first class school for females only was made by the late Hon. A. Atkinson between 1825 and 1830. Mr. A. employed an accomplished Northern lady Miss Stillman as an instructress of his daughter with permission to receive a few other girls in the school to be accommodated in his dwelling. For climatic reason this lady returned to her northern home after a short sojourn of 12 or 18 months. Mr. Atkinson with the cooperation of other citizens with daughters of suitable ages for other than elementary instruction invited Mrs. Julia Hayden a highly educated lady of Connecticut, who accepted an invitation to settle in Smithfield and establish a female school of a high order . Her

school commenced the year after Miss Stillman left Mr. Atkinson. Before a description of this school is given I will briefly mention a boarding school for females on a small scale, that was opened in Smithfield about 1820 by Mrs. Bernard, the wife of Rev. Allen R. Bernard of M. E. Church. It was moderately successful, one or two of her pupils very estimable ladies ~~one~~ now living. Closed by death [of] Mrs. Bernard after several years operation. Just before Mrs. Bernard an elderly lady Mrs. Bradley kept a school for small girls.

When Mrs. Hayden's school was established the education of females in this county comprised generally Reading, Writing and Arithmetic to the Rule of Three and a little Grammar. Many were not taught to read Bible or write their names. A few men of wealth and good social position deemed it a duty to have their daughters instructed in the branches that are now considered essential accomplishments. I do not remember a Governess or private teacher in any family previous to Miss Stillman. Good female schools in country and small towns were rare. There may have been a tolerable female school in Norfolk and Petersburg: which could not have been held in much repute as pupils from the counties of Brunswick, Pr. George and Princess Ann were drawn here by the extensive reputation of Mrs. Hayden's school. It was continued until age and physical infirmities compelled its suspension. For 25 years it annually increased in public favor. The boarding houses in Smithfield were generally crowded and some of the private families gave accommodations to pupils. For some years Miss H. Benham assisted her sister in the duties of the

school. Mrs. Hayden was remarkable for her system of thorough instruction which many of our most accomplished ladies rec'd. In a few instances two generations mother and daughter were educated in this distinguished institution. Mrs. Hayden married a citizen of the town and her female Academy became a Boarding School. Her terms for Tuition and Board were moderate indeed when compared with the extravagant charges of similar schools of the present day. Mrs. Hayden was followed by some excellent teachers some of them her old scholars viz. Misses Victoria Wilson and Lauretta Norsworthy, Miss Field and the Misses Kate, -- the two latter were from New Hampshire most estimable ladies and superior teachers and established a fine school in the town for several years, one of them married a gentleman of the county and is teaching in the Public Schools of the county about five miles from town. A question of grave importance suggest itself, have the many Sectarian High School (so called) which since the war have been strewn broad-cast over Va., when viewed from the stand-point of domestic economy, been a public benefit? Can other answer be truthfully given, than that it is very doubtful if any solid benefits have been generally derived from these so called institutions of learning? When the heavy expenses incurred, frequently beyond the means of the patrons are considered with the passion for extravagance in dress, jewelry and costly dis-play so often acquired -- the aversion to all physical employ-ments and all mental occupations save the reading of novellettes or other worse light literature -- the neglect of special domestic duties and no preparation for household affairs -- unless playing

the piano, dancing the German and knocking croquet balls can be so classed -- when such habits as these, the legitimate heralds of idleness prodigality and indifference to the prosperity of our homes are implanted on the minds of maturing females. I ask with trembling suspense can we expect them to become the mothers of such men as filled the Confederate ranks in our late civil revolt? This question demands a prompt reply -- its decision is incumbent on the parents, guardians and public authorities of the state. Rather than my daughter should be an Alumna of some such colleges she should receive only the learning to be obtained around the family hearth.

When I was a boy Miss Cunningham afterwards the mother of Rev. D. P. Wills had a female school with a few boarders in ... residence on the farm now owned by Wm. F. [Jordan] The ancient mansion was on the site of the 3 dwellings near the creek which were erected by Mr. Thos. Purdie in 1838 & 9. Miss Cunningham I have heard was intelligent whether educated at home or in what schools I cannot say. At least in future years she was the teacher of her ~~old~~ own children who were generally considered fair scholars. Between the years 1840 & 60 there were in Smithfield mixed schools for small children kept by Miss Susan Voi... , Miss L. Drew, now Mrs. Langhorne, Mrs. Martha An... , Miss E. P. Purdie, Miss Maria Morrison and Misses Finney ... , Miss Finney's school was suspended by late hostilities in 1859. Since the war they have conducted a Female Boarding School of an established general reputation in Suffolk.

Schools in the county during the late War, as other important interests had to succumb to the calls for defense A. Atkinson, a large part of whose life, then over "3 score years and 10" have been devoted to professional labors & in the legislative service of his state and United States, prompted by motives of public beneficence as well as to secure mental employment, very kindly rec'd in his office as a school room, a few small boys, whom he instructed until some better school was established. Mr. Atkinson had no experience in teaching, an entirely new occupation to him but as one of his patrons I candidly say he gave satisfaction to me & ~~MK~~ I think to all.

In 1862 or 63 Jas. B. Whitehead opened a male school at his residence near town. From much experience in early life, his was a good English school, ~~gen~~erally consisting of 15 or 20 pupils. He was a man of strong mind & retentive memory & extensive reading, by common consent an oddity, he was a favored public functionary as constable and sheriff for many years and was the guardian of ~~More~~ wards and the representative of more estates(than any)citizen before him. After the surrender of the confederates ... Saml. W. Goodson opened a classical male & female school in Smithfield; its operation continued several years during which time he was assisted by E. W. Morrison. In 1867 Mr. Goodson retired and moved to Richmond & Col. E. W. Morrison became the Principal of this school & continued as such until the adoption of the Pub. School system.

Upon application of the Town Council, School trustees and patrons of his school he was allowed by the State Board of Education to teach this school when turned over to the Pub. School system. It is now every alternate 5 months a graded school with two teachers and of which he is Principal.